

COCAINE

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Vs—the anti-depressants and the tranquilliser Valium that users need when there's no crack in their blood.

'You can go to the corner and buy it anywhere,' says Father Lawrence Quinn, a Catholic priest in the Bronx. 'Even eight and nine-year-old are using it.' It's so matter-of-fact that dealers refund a 10 cent deposit on the plastic containers, just like soda pop.

Now if you buy powdered cocaine, it's cocaine hydrochloride and at best it will be half pure. But crack is pure cocaine base, without the risks of burning yourself 'free-basing.' 'It gets to the brain, they say, in eight to 10 seconds,' says Detective George Kosnik of New York Police narcotics division. 'They say it's more intense than an orgasm.'

But the effect is briefer than cocaine, and when the user comes down he goes low—lower each time. Without more crack, or the cocktail of Es and Vs, he'll turn depressed and paranoid, maybe violent. And it seems, from the Hotline figures, that users are 'hes'—mostly male, and under 30.

They pay only \$10 for a hit of crack—one milligramme crystals that are crushed and sprinkled on a cigarette or smoked with more ceremony through a water-cooled 'bong' or hookah. For powdered cocaine, they'd pay between \$20 and \$50. People are nervous now about snorting drugs, which hurts the nose; and about injecting them, with the risk of AIDS. 'Crack is as easy as a glass of wine,' says Det. Kosnik.

It may be a drug barons' marketing scheme. Two years ago, the Drug Enforcement Agency had solid intelligence from Miami that the Colombians wanted to bring down the street price of cocaine dramatically—a special offer to widen their market. Very soon after that, crack first hit the streets. It may also have to do with the Colombian decision to process cocaine in the States.

It's certain that a dealer makes three times the profit when he sells cocaine as crack, not powder. And he doesn't need a laboratory—only baking soda, water, a blender and a frying-pan (we won't be more exact, for obvious reasons). 'It's a cottage industry,' Det. Kosnik says.

'But, mostly, it's a change on the streets,' says Cornelius Dougherty of the Drug Enforcement Agency in Washington, 'a retail change, if you like.'

Crack is reported from every major American city. There are rumours it has reached Europe. The National Drugs Intelligence Unit at the Metropolitan Police said last week that they had not come across it, but Release, the national drugs and legal advice service, have already had a couple of calls from users in Britain and a London cocaine dealer says: 'People are ringing me up all the time asking, "Can you get me some crack?"'

People who try crack know at once they can't control it, as they thought they controlled pot and cocaine; when you can't think without six hits a day, you know you are addicted.

The crack epidemic is doing what propaganda never could—making people question their over-cosy relationship with chemical highs.